Soda Water ...Sal...

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

WHEN the great engine which we called the Skyscraper came out of the Zanesville shops, she was rebuilt from pilot to tender. Our master mechanic, Neighbor, had an idea, after her terrific collision, that she could not stand heavy main line passenger runs, so he put her on the Acton cut off. It was what railroad men call a jerk water run, whatever that may be, a little jaunt of ten miles across the divide connecting the northern division with the Denver stem. It was just about like running a trolley, and the run was given to Dad Sinclair, for after that lift at Oxford his back was never strong enough to shovel coal, and he had to take an engine or quit railroading.

Thus it happened that after many years he took the throttle once more and ran over, twice a day, as he does yet, from Acton to Willow Creek.

His boy, Georgie Sinclair, the kid engineer, took the run on the flier opposite Foley just as soon as he got well.

Georgie, who was never happy unless he had eight or ten Pullmans behind him and the right of way over everything between Omaha and Denver, made great sport of his father's little smoking car and day coach behind the big engine.

Foley made sport of the remodeled engine. He used to stand by while the old engineer was oiling and ask him whether he thought she could catch a jack rabbit. "I mean," Foley would say, "if the rabbit was feeling well."

Dad Sinclair took it all grimly and quietly. He had railroaded too long to care for anybody's chaff. But one day, after the skyscraper had got her flues pretty well chalked up with alkali, Foley insisted that she must be renamed.

"I have the only genuine skyscraper on the West End myself," declared Foley. He did have a new Class H engine, and she was awe inspiring, in truth. "I don't propose," he continued, "to have her confused with your old tub any longer, Dad."

Dad, oiling his old tub affectionately, answered never a word.

"She's full of soda, isn't she, father?" asked Georgie, standing by.

"Reckon she is, son."

"Full of water, I suppose?"

"Try to keep her that way, son."

"Sal Soda, isn't it, Dad?"

"Now, I can't say. As to that I can't say."

"We'll call her Sal Soda, Georgie," suggested Foley.

"No," interposed Georgie. "Stop a bit. I have it. Not Sal Soda at all. Make it Soda Water Sal."

Then they laughed uproariously, and in the teeth of Dad Sinclair's protests—for he objected at once and vigorously—the queer name stuck to the engine, and sticks yet.

To have seen the great hulking machine you would never have suspected there could be another story left in her. Yet one there was—a story of the wind. As she stood, too, when old man Sinclair took her on the Acton run, she was the best illustration I have ever seen of the adage that one can never tell from the looks of a frog how far it will jump.

Have you ever felt the wind? Not, I think, unless you have lived on the seas or on the plains. People everywhere think the wind blows, but it really blows only on the ocean and on the prairies.

The summer that Dad took the Acton run it blew for a month steadily—all of one August—hot, dry, merciless, the despair of the farmer and the terror of trainmen.

It was on an August evening, with the gale still sweeping up from the southwest, that Dad came lumbering into Acton with his little trolley train. He had barely pulled up at the platform to unload his passengers when the station agent, Morris Reynolds, coatless and hatless, rushed up to the engine ahead of the hostler and sprang into the cab. Reynolds was one of the quietest fellows in the service. To see him without coat or hat didn't count for much in such weather, but to see him sallow with fright and almost speechless was enough to stir even old Dad Sinclair.

It was not Dad's habit to ask questions, but he looked at the man in questioning amazement. Reynolds choked and caught at his breath as he seized the engineer's arm and pointed down the line.

"Dad," he gasped, "three cars of coal standing over there on the second spur blew loose a few minutes ago!"

"Where are they?"

"Where are they? Blown through the switch and down the line forty miles an hour."

The old man grasped the frightened man by the shoulder. "What do you mean? How long ago? When is I due? Talk quick, man! What's the matter with you?"

"Not five minutes ago. No. 1 is due here in less than thirty minutes. They'll go into her sure. Dad," cried Reynolds, all in a fright, "what'll I do? For heaven's sake, do something! I called up Riverton and tried to catch 1, but she'd passed. I was too late. There'll be a wreck, and I'm booked for the penitentiary. What can I do?"

All the while the station agent, panic stricken, rattled on Sinclair was looking at his watch, casting it up, charting it all under his thick, gray, grizzled wool, fast as thought could compass.

No. 1 headed for Acton, and her pace was a hustle every mile of the way—three cars of coal bowling down on her, how fast he dared not think, and through it all he was asking himself what day it was. Thursday? Up! Yes, Georgie, his boy, was on the flier No. 1. It was his day up. If they met on a curve—

"Uncouple her!" roared Dad Sinclair in a giant tone.

"What are you going to do?"

"Burns," thundered Dad to his fireman, "give her steam, and quick, boy! Dump in grease, waste, oil, everything! Are you clear there?" he cried, opening the throttle as he looked back.

The old engine, pulling clear of her coaches, quivered as she gathered herself under the steam. She leaped ahead with a swish. The drivers churned in the sand, bit into it with gritting tires and forged ahead with a suck and a hiss and a roar. Before Reynolds had fairly gathered his wits Sinclair, leaving his train on the main track in front of the depot, was clattering over the switch after the runaways. The wind was a terror, and they had too good a start. But the way Soda Water Sal took the gait when she once felt her feet under her made the wrinkled engineer at her throttle set his mouth with the grimness of a gamester. It meant the runaways—and catch them—or the ditch for Soda Water Sal, and the throbbing old machine seemed to know it, for her nose hung to the steel like the snout of a pointer.

He was a man of a hundred even then—Burns—but nobody knew it then. We hadn't thought much about Burns before. He was a tall, lank Irish boy, with an open face and a morning smile. Dad Sinclair took him on because nobody else would have him. Burns was so green that Foley said you couldn't set his name afire. He would, so Foley said, put out a hot box just by blinking at it.

But every man's turn comes once, and it had come to Burns. It was Dick Burns' chance now to show what manner of stuff was bred in his long Irish bones. It was his task to make the steam—if he could—faster than Dad Sinclair could burn it. What use to grip the throttle and scheme if Burns didn't furnish the power, put the life into her heels as she raced the wind—the merciless, restless gale sweeping over the prairie faster than horse could fly before it?

Working smoothly and swiftly into a dizzy whirl, the monstrous drivers took the steel in leaps and bounds. Dad Sinclair, leaning from the cab window, gloatingly watched their gathering speed, pulled the bar up notch after notch, and fed Burns' fire into the old engine's arteries fast and faster than she could throw it into her steel hoofs.

That was the night the West End knew that a greenhorn had cast his chrysalis and stood out a man—knew that the honor roll of our frontier division wanted one more name, and that it was big Dick Burns'. Sinclair hung silently desperate to the throttle, his eyes straining into the night ahead, and the face of the long Irish boy, streaked with smut and channeled with sweat, lit every minute with the glare of the furnace as he fed the white hot blast that leaped and curled and foamed under the crown sheet of Soda Water Sal.

There he stooped and sweat and swung as she slewed and lurched and jerked across the fish plates. Carefully, nursingly, ceaselessly he pushed the steam pointer higher, higher, higher on the dial—and that despite the tremendous drafts of Dad's throttle.

Never a glance to the right or the left, to the track or the engineer. From

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the coal to the fire, the fire to the water, the water to the gauge, the gauge to the stack and back again to the coal—that was Burns. Neither eyes nor ears nor muscles for anything but steam.

Such a firing as the West End never saw till that night; such a firing as the old engine never felt in her choking flues till that night; such a firing as Dad Sinclair, king of all West and East End firemen, lifted his hat to—that was Burns' firing that night on Soda Water Sal, the night she chased the Acton runaways down the line to save Georgie Sinclair and No. 1.

It was a frightful pace—how frightful no one ever knew; neither old man Sinclair nor Dick Burns ever cared. Only, the crew of a freight, side tracked for the approaching flier, saw an engine flying light; knew the hunter and the quarry, for they had seen the runaways shoot by—saw then, a minute after, a star and a streak and a trail of rotten smoke fly down the wind, and she had come and passed and gone.

It was just east of that siding, so Burns and Sinclair always maintained, but it measured 10,000 feet east, that they caught them.

A shout from Dad brought the dripping fireman up standing, and, looking ahead, he saw in the blaze of their own headlight the string of coalers standing still ahead of them—so it seemed to him—their own speed was so great, and the runaways were almost equaling it. They were making forty miles an hour when they dashed past the paralyzed freight crew.

Without waiting for orders—what orders did such a man need?—without a word Burns crawled out of his window with a pin and ran forward on the footboard, clinging the best he could as the engine dipped and lurched, climbed down on the cowcatcher and lifted the pilot bar to couple. It was a crazy thing to attempt. He was much likelier to get under the pilot than to succeed, yet he tried it.

Then it was that the fine hand of Dad Sinclair came into play. To temper the speed enough, and just enough, to push her nose just enough and far enough for Burns to make the draw bar of the runaway—that was the nicety of the big seamed hands on the throttle and on the air, the very magic of touch which on a slender bar of steel could push a hundred tons of flying metal up and hold it steady in a play of six inches on the teeth of the gale that tore down behind him.

Again and again Burns tried to couple and failed. Sinclair, straining anxiously ahead, caught sight of the headlight of No. 1 rounding O'Fallon's bluffs.

He cried to Burns, and, incredible though it seems, the fireman heard. Above all the infernal din, the tearing of the flanges and the roaring of the wind Burns heard the cry. It nerved him to a supreme effort. He slipped the eye once more into the draw and managed to drop his pin. Up went his hand in signal.

Choking the steam, Sinclair threw the brake shoes flaming against the big drivers. The sand poured on the rails, and with Burns up on the coalers setting brakes the three great runaways were brought to with a jerk that would have astounded the most reckless scapegraces in the world.

While the plucky fireman crept along the top of the freight cars to keep from being blown bodily through the air, Sinclair, with every resource that brain and nerve and power could exert, was struggling to overcome the terrible headway of pursuer and pursued, driving now frightfully into the beaming head of No. 1.

With the Johnson bar over and the drivers dancing a gallop backward; with the sand striking fire and the rails burning under it; with the old skyscraper shivering again in a terrific struggle and Burns twisting the heads off the brake rods; with every trick of old Sinclair's cunning and his boy duplicating every one of them in the cab of No. 1—still they came together. It was too fearful a momentum to overcome, when minutes mean miles and tons are reckoned by thousands.

They came together, but instead of an appalling wreck, destruction and death it was only a bump. No. 1 had the speed when they met, and it was a car of coal dumped a bit sudden and a nose on Georgie's engine like a fullback's after a center rush. The pilot doubled back into the ponies, and the headlight was scoured with nut, pen and slack, but the stack was hardly bruised.

The minute they struck Georgie Sinclair, making fast and leaping from his cab, ran forward in the dark, panting with rage and excitement. Burns, torch in hand, was himself just jumping down to get forward. His face wore its usual grin, even when Georgie assailed him with a torrent of abuse.

"What do you mean, you red headed lubber?" he shouted, with much the lungs of his father. "What are you doing switching coal here on the main line?"

In fact, Georgie called the astonished fireman everything he could think of until his father, who was blundering forward on his side of the engine, hearing the voice, turned and ran around behind the tender to take a hand himself.

"Mean?" he roared above the blow of his safety. "Mean?" he bellowed in the teeth of the wind. "Mean? Why, you impudent, empty headed, ungrateful rapscallion, what do you mean coming around here to abuse a man that's saved you and your train from the scrap?"

And big Dick Burns, standing by with his torch, burst into an Irish laugh, fairly doubled up before the nonplused boy and listened with great relish to the excited father and excited son. It was not hard to understand Georgie's amazement and anger at finding Soda Water Sal behind three cars of coal halfway between stations on the main line and on his time—and that the fastest time on the division. But what amused Burns most was to see the imperturbable old Dad pitching into his boy with as much spirit as the young man himself showed.

It was because both men were scared out of their wits; scared over their narrow escape from a frightful wreck; from having each killed the other, maybe—the son the father, and the father the son.

For brave men do get scared. Don't believe anything else. But between the fright of a coward and the fright of a brave man there is this difference—the coward's scare is apparent before the danger, that of the brave man after it has passed, and Burns laughed with a tremendous mirth "at th' two o' thim ajawin'," as he expressed it.

No man on the West End could turn on his pins quicker than Georgie Sinclair, though, if his hastiness misled him. When it all came clear he climbed into the old cab—the cab he himself had once gone against death in—and with stumbling words tried to thank the tall Irishman, who still laughed in the excitement of having won.

And when Neighbor next day, thoughtful and taciturn, heard it all, he very carefully looked Soda Water Sal all over again.

"Dad," said he, when the boys got through telling it for the last time, "she's a better machine than I thought she was."

"There isn't a better pulling your coaches," maintained Dad Sinclair stoutly.

"I'll put her on the main line, Dad, and give you the 168 for the cut off. Hm?"

"The 168 will suit me, Neighbor. Any old tub—eh, Foley?" said Dad, turning to the cheeky engineer, who had come up in time to hear most of the talk. The old fellow had not forgotten Foley's sneer at Soda Water Sal when he rechristened her. But Foley, too, had changed his mind and was ready to give in.

"That's quite right, Dad," he acknowledged. "You can get more out of any old tub on the division than the rest of us fellows can get out of a Baldwin consolidated. I mean it too. It's the best thing I ever heard of. What are you going to do for Burns, Neighbor?" asked Foley, with his usual assurance.

"I was thinking I would give him Soda Water Sal and put him on the right side of the cab for a freight run. I reckon he earned it last night."

In a few minutes Foley started off to hunt up Burns.

"See here, Irish," said he in his off hand way, "next time you catch a string of runaways just remember to climb up the ladder and set your brakes before you couple. It will save a good deal of wear and tear on the pilot bar, see? I hear you're going to get a run. Don't fall out the window when you get over on the right."

And that's how Burns was made an engineer and how Soda Water Sal was rescued from the disgrace of running on the trolley.